

GATEWAY CHURCH NORTHUMBLERLAND

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Shine like stars – Joss Bray

Today in our travels through the letter to the Philippians, we're going to look at one of those passages that pulls no punches.

It is very challenging – not least to me – the person who has to talk on it! We'll come to that in a moment.

First of all – last week we read this from Philippians 2 which Dave talked about:

¹² Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed – not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence – continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, ¹³ for it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfil his good purpose.

Remember that working out your salvation is not about working for your salvation.

And remember it says there is fear and trembling involved and that actually God is working in us to fulfil what he wants for us.

Working out your salvation is like making bread- apparently.

You have dough – and you have got to work it – kneading it – so I understand.

It needs squeezing and shaping and working on so that the eventual bread is good – here is one description of the process:

“work dough, usually by hand, for the purpose of developing the glutens in the flour, which is what gives baked goods their structure and texture...”

Now – it seems to me that this is very like what God does to us.

We are the dough.

So - if we have been saved – we have salvation – our future is assured, and our hope is certain.

We know who we are in God – we are his very much-loved children and that he has a purpose and a destiny for us that starts with forgiveness, and progresses through freedom, to life forever with him.

But - if you can't say that for yourself – make the decision now to take new life over the old – to take freedom over bondage to the past – to take hold of an eternal hope and destiny over eternal fear and darkness.

However - our initial salvation – our coming to God thorough Jesus and being born again – is just the start.

At that point we are like dough that's just been created.

We need some kneading!

If we are going to be effective followers of Jesus - we need some work – don't we?

The first disciples certainly did – and it was painful for some.

There were thought processes that needed to be changed, attitudes that needed to be exposed and challenged and indeed the very culture they lived in would be affected and be changed because God was at work in them.

It is the same for us – when we are being worked on – kneaded by God - things will need to change.

And its not pleasant sometimes is it?

Isn't there fear and trembling sometimes when we are in the hands of the living almighty God and he lets us go through things that are difficult and painful.

But - that process will ultimately give us that structure and texture that the dough needs, to become the thing that is was ultimately meant to be.

Our only comfort and reassurance is this – God knows what he is doing, and He loves us.

He knows pain and sorrow – remember what Jesus – his only son – went through.

God is not distant and uncaring.

He lives right here – inside us – because that's where his Holy Spirit lives – that is his promise to be with us always – he will never abandon us – never.

So – if you feel a bit kneaded – a bit worked over – take it as an opportunity to work out your salvation – to be worked on for future glory – and even to work out what your salvation meant in the first place!

We could also talk about parallels with working out in the gym – but then I would have absolutely no experience or credentials to share in that area

However, it's worth thinking about building those spiritual muscles of perseverance, assurance, single mindedness, making progress, overcoming – and so on – those things that are common to both physical and spiritual health.

It's worth thinking about isn't it – working out our salvation is a challenging process – whether you like the baking or gym picture – it is necessary to become the person God really wants us to be.

So, then we come to the next few verses:

¹⁴ Do everything without grumbling or arguing, ¹⁵ so that you may become blameless and pure, 'children of God without fault in a warped and crooked generation.'¹⁶ Then you will shine among them like stars in the sky ¹⁶ as you hold firmly to the word of life. And then I will be able to boast on the day of Christ that I did not run or labour in vain. ¹⁷ But even if I am being poured out like a drink offering on the sacrifice and service coming from your faith, I am glad and rejoice with all of you. ¹⁸ So you too should be glad and rejoice with me.

Well – straight off – here is something we need to be worked on about – or is it just me!

"Do everything without grumbling or arguing" - you can substitute disputing, questioning, complaining, murmuring – and so on – depending on the translation.

But we get the point don't we.

Dealing with these issues is all part of developing as a Christian.

And the amazing thing is that when we stop grumbling or arguing about doing things, something else happens!

So, what is it that happens?

We are changed on the outside and on the inside!

We become blameless – so no one can accuse or blame us - they won't be able to because there is nothing they can see, to blame us for.

Why is that – because we have also become pure inside!

Our behaviour has a direct effect on our inner life – of course this is true the other way around – what we think and feel affects what we do – but equally what we do and say affects how we think and feel!

It's a marvellous circular pathway which ends up with us being both changed for the good - outside and inside!

Isn't God's design good!

And of course, the opposite is true – the more grumbling and complaining and arguing we do, will adversely affect the way we feel and think inside – that's well worth thinking about.

Are we feeling bitter and angry inside? Then change what you do on the outside and see how that changes you on the inside.

This is something that the world is quite well aware of – cognitive behavioural therapy – CBT - works on both these approaches – what you think and feel affects what you do – and what you do will affect how you think and feel.

It's a biblical principle – right there – and worth taking on board.

So – if I find myself having to do something – or being asked to do something that I don't particularly want to do - how am I going to behave?

And I am not talking about having to do things that are wrong – just things that need to be done but might be annoying, awkward, a bit out of my comfort zone, inconvenient, menial or something that I think someone else really ought to be doing!

I think we can all think of examples there.

So – what should our reaction be – simples – as they say – do it without arguing or grumbling about it – even afterwards to others!

Then – we shall become children of God without fault in a warped and crooked generation... and we shall shine like stars.

Do you want to be a star? – that's the way to do it.

Do you want to make a difference – to positively affect the world? - that's how to do it.

Do you want to work out your salvation? – do this – and you'll be doing really well.

Stars shine don't they – they give people a sense of a bigger picture – a sense of awe and wonder.

We can be like that in the generation of people we are now in, who less and less have a sense of God and truth and not even knowing anything about Jesus.

A generation for whom “spirituality” is OK – but the Holy Spirit is not recognised and honoured for who he is.

A generation where you can believe what you like unless it offends someone – and where there is no absolute Truth and social media massively shapes people thinking without them even understanding what's going on.

It's the same generation as in Isaiah's day – in chapter 9 of his book, he comments:

The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light. They lived in a land of shadows, but now light is shining on them.

This is prophesying the events of Christmas - Jesus's birth and the momentous events that followed that shone the light on the way to the Father.

We are now the light of the world – stars shining in the darkness – pointing the way – holding firm to the word of life as Paul said.

So - what is this word of life?

Remember – Jesus is the very word of God to us – his statement, his purpose, the expression of who he is.

When Jesus said in John 14:6 –

“I am the way, the truth, and the life; no one goes to the Father except by me.”

- he really meant it.

You want life – you want to know what life is all about – you want the truth – look into Jesus.

That's our message that we have to hold on to firmly – not weakly, or apologetically – but firmly.

God isn't a God of weakness – but he meets us in our weakness – and makes us strong in His power.

Strong to shine like stars shining for all they're worth.

Shine like the star in the East guiding the wise men to Jesus – this Christmas think of yourself as being a star like that - guiding people to Jesus - whenever you hear that story.

And then we can be glad and rejoice together – just as Paul saw it happening in the Philippians when we see it happening in each other.

Whatever he and they went through - they rejoiced and were glad – because their focus was on something and someone much bigger than their present circumstances.

They were not going to let whatever they went through – and it would have been pretty tough – stop them.

Through their faith came sacrifice and service – that's what we read,

That's what it produced in them and that's our model too - faith producing sacrifice and service.

No grumbling, no complaining, and we'll be shining like stars.

And there will be an outbreak of gladness and rejoicing!

It's a dark world and it needs light doesn't it – and that's our challenge – are we up for it?